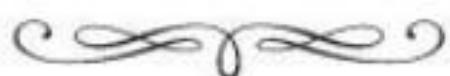


The  
Sword of the Lady

A NOVEL OF THE CHANGE



S. M. STIRLING



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**NOVELS OF THE CHANGE**

ISLAND IN THE SEA OF TIME  
AGAINST THE TIDE OF YEARS  
ON THE OCEANS OF ETERNITY

DIES THE FIRE  
THE PROTECTOR'S WAR  
A MEETING AT CORVALLIS

THE SUNRISE LANDS  
THE SCOURGE OF GOD

**OTHER NOVELS BY S.M. STIRLING**

THE PESHAWAR LANCERS  
CONQUISTADOR

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The  
Sword of the Lady

A NOVEL OF THE CHANGE



S. M. STIRLING



A ROC BOOK

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The "ancestral epic" in Chapter Seventeen is actually the opening paragraph of *The Broken Sword*, a fantasy classic by Poul Anderson. Go out and get it!

Much overdue thanks to Russell Galen, my agent, who has been an invaluable help and friend for a decade now. By a stunning noncoincidence, my career has shot up like a sapling in this period. We make a good team; not only is he smart as a whip on the business side, but his advice on literature

matters and on the conjunction between the two has been spot-on.

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All mistakes, infelicities and errors are of course my own.



# THE WILD LANDS (FORMERLY ILLINOIS) MIDDLE ILLINOIS RIVER AUGUST 18, CHANGE YEAR 24/2022 AD

*"Shining pearl within the crimson sky,  
Guide me in the coming night  
Perfect seed within the humble husk,  
Ground my feet in soil so I may rise  
Patient leaf within the endless pool  
Calm me when the torrent falls  
Gentle wind within the slanting grass  
Bear me ever on until I rest—"*

Rudi Mackenzie and Edain hadn't been singing the hymn; more of a breathy whisper, though it rang loud in their minds as the moon rose enormous on the horizon, and they'd come down here below the lip of the valley where there was more cover for the rite. Rudi stopped instantly when a stick snapped. The warm sense of communion ghosted away like dust in a desert, and he sank down behind the tang of wild rose in a motion that was swift but smooth rather than a catch-the-eye jerk.

Five paces to his right and a little behind him Edain Aylward Mackenzie did the same; his greasy shaggy half-mastiff bitch Garbh vanished even more completely, belly to the ground, ears cocked and only her black nose moving as it wrinkled. The air wasn't moving enough to carry scent any distance but her blocky barrel-shaped head seemed to split as the thin black lips drew back silently from her long yellow fangs.

The other half of her was probably wolf.

Both men listened hunter-fashion, with their whole bodies: not straining, but opening themselves to the summer twilight, letting sound and sight and smells and the movement of air on skin flow in unimpeded. You *knew*. The evening hush was strong and the hot thick air hazy along the ridge where they lay above the river valley, full of rank odors of flowers and greenery and warm earth damp from yesterday's thunderstorm. Sweat trickled down Rudi's flanks beneath the brigantine torso-armor he wore, a corselet of little steel plates riveted between two layers of soft green leather. Something with too many legs bit the back of his left knee below the kilt and above the sock-hose, adding to the prickling itches. The coarse sandy grain of the leather on the riser grip of his longbow drank moisture from the palm of his left hand, growing damp but not slippery, which was the point.

The steep fall of ground to the river below was a patchy almost-forest. Single stands or clumps of mature pre-Change burr oak and shagbark hickory, black walnut and sugar maple reared above teardrop-shaped surrounds of saplings, where they'd rolled their seed downslope in the decades since the State foresters had stopped coming to prune and tend. The new growth ranged from fresh sprouts

to fair-sized trees as old as Rudi, but the canopy wasn't tall or closely spaced enough to shade out the undergrowth yet, and a dense understory of weeds and scrub was just past its summer prime.

The open spaces were brushy meadow scattered with white pasture thistle and Queen Anne's lace and thickets of four-foot-tall Gaura, its pink flowers a wash of fading color as the deeper scarlet of its leaves turned black with sunset. The faint sweet scent of it became stronger with crushed stems and petals; as the sun dropped lower behind him he could see the tops of the plants swaying in little jerks in half a dozen spots. Once . . . a moment's stillness . . . twice . . . again . . . another pause . . .

*And there's no wind,* Rudi thought grimly, as his mouth went dry.

He was only twenty-three, but he'd seen enough violent death to know how easily it could happen to him—know in body and blood, as well as his head. He kept his breaths long and deep and slow to help loosen the tightness in gut and crotch and slow the pounding of blood that were the instinctive response to a sudden deadly threat. Half of transcending fear was making the flesh serve the spirit's need, instead of letting it command you. And breathing deep could give you a little extra endurance when you needed it. Not much, but every bit counted at the narrow passage. His eyes stayed fixed on the vegetation and the off-and-on course of the small betraying motions.

*Men crawling on their bellies then, moving a bit at a time and pausing in between. Men or wolves or wild dogs, they all know that trick, but I'd be betting the first.*

Here in the Wild Lands men would most likely attack him on sight, and they'd likely be faster than he afoot, over ground they knew. He glanced over to where Edain waited, a movement of eyes more than head, and got a very slight nod.

That meant both agreement that they were undetected so far and *waiting on you, Chief*. Here and now that was both a burden and a comfort; the call was his, but you couldn't ask for a better man than Edain to have your back for all he was just turned twenty. Rudi moved his right-hand fingers, thumb up and down each as if counting on them, then turned it palm-up and lifted it a bit, a combination of gestures that meant *how many?* in Clan war-Sign. Edain's answer was a tiny shrug; he didn't have any real idea either.

*So . . . no less than six, possibly about thirty if they're very good. And they haven't seen us yet. It's someone else who's the expected guest at the feast, and them laying the table and knocking out the bung of the barrel of red salt ale. Someone coming by the track down there along the river; the position they're in will be invisible from down by the water's edge.*

The ambush was being set with real skill; he doubted most Mackenzie warriors could have done better, or even Dúnedain Rangers. He kept his breathing slow and quiet and deep, and his body motionless with a silent wariness that was coiled rather than stiff, ready to explode off the ground if he must. Nothing moved but his eyes, and he flicked them back and forth; a steady fixed gaze was oddly noticeable to the one you were staring at, like brushing a feather over the nape of the neck.

If it was only six or so savages then he and Edain could probably handle them, not taking into account whoever they were planning on ambushing. The two Mackenzies would have the advantage of surprise, height, good purpose-made armor and weapons rather than crude makeshifts, and skills none of the wild-men could match.

*But there's also the matter of the rights and wrongs of the thing, so.*

The ones walking into this ambush might be men of deep-dyed wickedness for all he knew, and meeting their fate; this wasn't his territory, and he wasn't one to draw the blade on strangers lightly.

*On the other hand, I need friends here—or at least allies. I've no time to spare; the lives of my friends depend on it. And at seventh and last, fights are usually about us and them, not rights and wrongs. Needs must when the Fates drive.*

Half in prayer: *And if this deed must return on the doer, let it fall on me; it's my decision, and Edain follows his chieftain. This is a burden I took up with the sword.*

A warrior's cold appraisal took over. They could certainly shoot at least three or four each before the enemy came close enough for handstrokes, perhaps more if there were many targets. If it was thirty of them . . . that was a different matter altogether.

There was a certain brute simplicity to the arithmetic of war. Thirty men weren't fifteen times stronger than two.

*More like forty or fifty times stronger,* he thought unhappily. *The advantage grows as the square of the difference, other things being equal.*

Nor was there any absolute certainty of safety whatever when men fought to kill. Sheer luck was involved; if your eye was in the place where a random arrow wanted to go, then it was off to the Summerlands willy nilly. He hadn't come all the way from the Willamette in Oregon to die in a little skirmish two-thirds of the way to his goal. Too much depended on him.

Their horses were behind and above them, in the strip of fire-scarred brushy woods where the open prairie met the valley, all loose-tethered, except his mare Epona who was guarding them. He made a low chittering sound between his teeth, something that melded into the natural buzz and twitter and creak of the wilds. That would keep her quiet, even if she scented another horse or heard it neigh. The problem was that it wouldn't mean anything to Edain's horse or the pack beast, who were . . .

*Not more than average bright, even for horses. I love horses but Epona aside . . .*

He was glad he'd done so a minute later, when the dull thud-and-clop of hooves sounded on the broken asphalt and dirt of the roadway that followed the Illinois River below. Four men rode in sight, with as many more packhorses on leading reins—there were bundles over their backs, and from the look of them and the trail of flies those held butchered game carcasses strapped up in the hide. Between them and Rudi the brush moved again, and he thought he caught the glint of edged metal through the gloaming of the summer evening. Someone was being a little overeager, or had forgotten to dip the blade of his spear in mud.

*Ambush, sure and I had the right of it,* Rudi thought. *They're concentrating on the road down there and with the sun at their backs to blind anyone looking their way. The which means they can't see me and Edain easily either, of course.*

From what he'd heard in Iowa the only dwellers here were vicious savages, descendants of city folk who'd lived through the first Change years by eating each other, worse and worse as you went farther east. That had been Ingolf's opinion too, and Ingolf Vogeler had made his living off salvage expeditions into the dead cities for many years. Journeying halfway across the continent with him had taught Rudi that the man from Wisconsin was usually a good judge.

*On the other hand, Edain and I cannot haul all those wagons of treasure to the Mississippi alone,* Rudi mused. *From the way things have gone this past week, we can't even get close to them without help from the folk hereabouts.*

He ducked lower and thoughtfully picked up his sallet helm and set it on his head, with the visor slid up along the low steel dome and locked in place and the sponge and felt lining pressing firmly around brow and temples and the back of his skull. Then he reached over his shoulder to his quiver for a shaft to set on his string. Edain did the same with his open-faced helmet, nocked one arrow and eased out three more from his quiver, holding them between one finger and his bow, a trick for rapid shooting. If they were careful there was little chance the ambushers would notice, and it was well to be ready. Also the dull matt-green surface of the steel was less conspicuous than the raw metal. The brightness of his shoulder-length red-blond mane, or even the sun-streaked oak brown of Edain's curly mop.

*And haul those wagons to Iowa I must, since that is the price demanded to release Matti. And Ingolf and all my friends and kin by that . . .*

Right now he had to keep his mind cool. Thinking *mad tyrant* of Anthony Heasleroad would ju

make him rage, though the very Gods knew it was accurate.

~~...by that... eccentric gentleman... the Bossman of Iowa. Will there ever be a chance with less risk~~  
Even trying to back away might spook the ones hiding there. And what better, quicker introduction to the men they mean to kill than a rescue? If I must work with cannibals or the children of such, I will.

After all, if you got too choosy about people's ancestors . . .

*Were the Gael not once headhunters who burned men alive as sacrifices? Did the English not come to these lands with fire and massacre? And was not my anamchara Matti's father a monster to turn a man's stomach, sure?*

Decision jelled. With his free hand he reached down and picked up a clod of soil, touching it to his lips in silent prayer for an instant: *Earth must be fed*. To take life was to accept your own death's part in the world, and the gesture acknowledged it. Edain copied the motion, and they both set their fingers to the strings of their longbows.

The horsemen riding unaware into the trap down the road below were stripped to the waist in the muggy heat, regardless of the mosquitoes that were beginning to whine. Even at a hundred yards and through the gloaming he could see that three of them carried long spears tipped with ground-dove butcher knives, and they all had a clutch of javelins slung over their backs as well in something like a big quiver. Then the still air shifted and a little breeze cuffed at leaf and twig around him, cooling the sweat that stuck strands of his hair to the back of his neck beneath the flare of the helm. The horses tossed their heads at the scent of their own kind; one nickered, and was answered by an equine snort from behind the two Mackenzies.

Rudi came smoothly to his feet, as swiftly as if he and the animal had practiced the signal together.

"Ambush!" he shouted, his trained voice throwing the sound from deep in his chest. "Trap! In the brush above you!"

The scrub exploded with armed men, screams and ragged figures and the ugly sheen of spearheads. Many more than he'd thought there would be, but it was too late to undo his decision. They wavered for a moment, caught between the foemen they had expected to take unawares and the strangers above them.

*Closer to thirty than to six of them. More like forty, the Dagda club them dead!* went through him in a flickering instant. *I do hope the men they wanted to kill can take some of the weight!*

"Morrigú!" Rudi screamed, to rivet their attention. "Morrigú!"

He called on the Crow Goddess as he drew and shot, for She was the one whose feathered host fed on the fruits of battle, the Dark Mother who had sent Raven to claim him in the *nemed* while he was still a child. Edain simply howled, the cry of the Wolf that was his sept totem, and then their voices rose together in the racking banshee shriek of the Clan's battle-yell.

One of the ambushers had a short stiff bow of some sort ready, and he had the presence of mind to turn and aim at the tall figure on the slope above. Rudi had already started to draw Mackenzie-style past the angle of his jaw as he called the warning, shoulders and gut and hips as much as arms in the force that bent the great stave of yellow yew-wood, but Edain was a fractional second ahead of him.

The cloth yard shaft snapped out as he let the string roll off his fingertips and lash at the bracer of his left forearm. The range was short, and his war-bow drew well over a hundred pounds. The arrow was a blurred streak in the dimness and then a *crack* of parting bone before the enemy archer flipped backward with the gray-goose fletching standing up like a brutal exclamation point from his face. Edain's shaft hadn't missed either; it went through the man's torso in a double splash, breaking ribs going in and coming out, then struck the next man behind in the stomach and stayed there. Rudi's hair flicked to the quiver again and again, nock-draw-aim-loose in the deadly fast ripple Mackenzies were taught from childhood, three seconds for an arrow. They were both shooting wherever a telltale shape or motion betrayed the obvious threat of an enemy archer.

Some sort of leader grabbed ambushers and pushed them towards the pair of clansmen as he yelled an order in a yammering dialect. It cut off in a gurgling scream as Edain shifted aim and sent an arrow through his throat. A score of the wild-men came uphill at the Mackenzies in a bounding rush, which as many more boiled down towards the river; they must have thought there were more than two new foemen, fooled by shock and the eye-watering brightness that lingered behind him and the shower of cloth-yard arrows stabbing down at them.

"Left, mine!" Rudi called sharply as the foe came on in a yelling mob, then spread out into a rough line.

The enemy must have had some concept of archery; they knew that they had to get across the killing ground as fast as they might. They had no idea at all of what the west-country longbow could do in the skilled hands, from the way they came straight on regardless with their shields up instead of dodging to and fro as they charged. And they were about to learn.

*Snap. Snap.*

The waxed linen of the bowstrings struck their leather bracers with a light whapping sound, and the arrows blurred out with a *whirrrt* of cloven air. A man dropped from each end of the attackers' rough formation, with the flat punching smack of arrowheads striking flesh loud enough to hear.

*Snap. Snap. Snap. Snap.*

Four more men died in eight seconds, three instantly and one screaming and thrashing as a cedarwood shaft hammered through shield and arm and chest before it lodged in his spine. Then the rest were upon him, snarling shouting hairy faces vaguely seen as they labored up the hillside as if from a well of darkness, weapons reaching for his life. He tossed aside the bow and swept out his longsword in a hiss of steel on greased wood and leather. The other hand stripped the little buckler from its clip on the scabbard.

He was the second-ranked archer in the Clan Mackenzie, who were a people of the bow. But Rudi had never met his own equal with the sword since he got his full growth, not anywhere in his travels. Not yet. Everything slowed, sound burring deeper, vision fading except for faces, hands, weapons; he felt light and easy, his motions flowing like water over rocks in a mountain torrent.

*I'm dead if I let them get around me and settle themselves, he knew. And I must keep their eyes on me and away from Edain. He has my back.*

Existence was a dance through the purple dusk, lines precise as those scribed with compass and surveyor's strings linking blade to target. It was *ríastrad*, the battle-madness of the warrior Godde whose scythe reaped men. He charged, shrieking, clearing the bush ahead of him with a long lunging stride; a yard of layer-forged steel in his fist and the eerie keening scream of the Mackenzies on his lips. A rust-pitted spearhead ground down from one blade of a pair of garden shears went over his right shoulder as he ducked beneath a thrust, and he struck with the buckler as it did.

The soup-plate shape of the metal shield cracked into a face covered in a black beard that crawled with lice, hard enough to make bone crumble and throw the wild-man backward to roll downslope in a tangle of limbs. With the weight of his armor added in there were better than two hundred pounds behind the blow, and the man wouldn't be getting up again. The twinge from the old wound in his right shoulder was distant, unimportant except to remind him of how the infected arrow had weakened it a little.

In the same instant the blade in his left hand flicked out, the point driving through a throat and passing it with scarcely a tug. Behind it a spray of droplets hung in the air for a second, black in the dying light.

There was a *wissst-thud* behind him and an earsplitting scream, as an arrow struck and lodged in bone; more hissed past to strike, one close enough for the fletching to brush the skin of his neck as it passed. The *first*-ranked archer in the Clan was in back of him, twice winner of the Silver Arrow

the Lughnasadh Games and a hunter of beasts and men. Then another cry of horrified pain, beneath a roaring growl; Garbh was at work protecting her master as he shot, darting in to slash at a hamstring and then close her great jaws on the man's face as he fell, jerking him back and forth as she worried what her long fangs held.

The twisted gorgon mask of Rudi's face made a man stumble back in midattack. And die an instant later in a galvanic convulsion as the sword point flicked into and out of his eye faster than a frog's tongue licking up a passing insect on the wing, punching through the thin bone and into the brain.

Another time, and the grating, crunching sensation that flowed up his hand and arm might come back to leave him sweating and clenched in some moment of peace. Now it was only a slight tug at his wrist as he wrenched the sword free and sliced down a spear shaft in a motion that left a long cut of wood flying free with the wielder's fingers.

A thunder of hooves, and Epona was there, her eyes white and rolling, her great slab teeth bared and she bugled a challenge. One of the wild-men looked around just in time to see her milling forehooves come down on him like steel-shod warhammers, and threw up his arms in a gesture as futile as his scream. The remaining attackers crowded forward towards Rudi, half attacking him, half fleeing he. A thought flickered through some remote corner of his mind:

*There are people who think horses can't be dangerous because they eat grass.*

A stab as precise as a surgeon's scalpel in over the collarbone, and a man collapsed with the great mass of arteries above the heart severed. The withdrawal turned into a smashing backhand chop that sent a spearhead pinwheeling away into the evening with half a foot of shaft still attached. He slid forward in a smooth savage rush; the man made one futile jabbing motion with the stub before Rudi cracked the pommel of his sword into the temple and drove bone-splinters into his brain.

*Get in close, he thought/knew.*

He leapt over the hocking swing of a blade that had probably started life as some sort of hedging tool and was near enough to the weapon westerners called a billhook. It hissed beneath his boots, and one of the wild-men screamed as it struck *his* leg, as much in rage as pain. Rudi kicked as he landed, a solid heel-strike to the billman's knee; something gave under the boot with a grisly snapping crunching sound.

*Ignore that one, he's out of it.*

He pushed off the impact, using it to swing himself around, the longsword slashing horizontally as he spun.

*Get close, get close . . .*

Too close for anyone to draw a spear back for a stab, and himself a whirling screaming striking blur that left death and ululating agony in its wake as the melee stumbled across the hillside's uncertain footing. Edges and clubs grated and banged on his helmet, thumped into his brigandine, hard enough to leave bruises he'd feel later, if he lived—they were striking at the head and body from instincts unused to dealing with real armor and not knowing how vulnerable they were to his ironclad violence.

*If I had full war-harness on and a knight's shield I could take the lot of them!*

But he didn't, and it could only be seconds until sharp metal hit something unprotected and vital—throat or limbs; he couldn't block a dozen men, couldn't kill them all. There wasn't *time*—

An ax looped towards his neck. Rudi's buckler deflected it with a *crang*, and his sword licked down on the man's arm above the elbow. The edge cracked into bone and through it with an ugly thump that jarred up the weapon and into his arm and shoulder. The man spun away, staring at the bleeding stump and then sitting down to die. Startled as the blood spurted over her fetlocks, Epona stopped stamping her body into rags of flesh and bone-splinter and reared to pound her hooves into him instead.

Rudi recovered with desperate speed and a spray of leaves and twigs beneath his boots, but the next man was poised with his spear cocked back to thrust into Rudi's face, the lunge already beginning . . .

... and he froze, with an expression of intense surprise on his features for an instant, as a wet red point appeared through his chest. Then he went flaccid and collapsed at the Mackenzie's feet. Behind him a horseman swerved his mount and snatched another javelin out of the hide bucket slung over his back, throwing it with a whoop. The shadowed woods were alive for an instant with leaping fleeing men, throwing aside their weapons to run with heedless speed and crashing through the thickets as the horsemen they'd ambushed harried them on.

Rudi thrust the point of his sword into the earth as a support, leaning with his mouth open to suck the air his lungs craved despite the raw stinks it bore. His other arm went around Epona's neck as she nuzzled him, the sweet grassy-musky scent of her breath and sweat strong in his nostrils as he panted. The wave of rage that had filled his veins and nerves like liquid fire cooled, leaving his skin rippling with a sudden cold and his body full of a leaden weakness.

Suddenly half a dozen minor cuts stung like itching fire, above the duller ache of wrenched and battered muscle. For a moment he was not sure if the gathering darkness was natural, or the product of a body driven beyond its limits. Fighting was the hardest labor in the world. He was young and very strong and in hard condition, but his body still tried to shake like an overworked horse, and he had to swallow again and again with a paper-dry mouth to keep the heavens from starting. His trainers back home, Mackenzies and Bearkillers and Association knights alike, had warned him that he pushed himself too hard.

So had Master Hao in Chenrezi Monastery, in the Valley of the Sun, where they'd taken refuge last winter from blizzards and pursuers; he'd been more specific about it, too:

*There is a deep inner well that the body can tap, a store of great strength, and of great speed. Most never reach it; and of those who do, most only when uttermost need breaks down the barriers. A few reach it through long training in the inner disciplines. But you, Raven-man, you can open that gate by wishing it so; it is in your nature. Be cautious with this gift! The merciful Buddha buried this deep within us for a reason! It is the last reserve against extremity. You shorten your life a little each time you draw from it.*

The problem being, of course, that having your skull dished in or six inches of steel shoved through your gut shortened life by much more than a little. He was very good with a blade, but nobody was good enough to deal with fighting many against one, unless something took him beyond himself. His skin quivered again. And you didn't feel the fear until afterwards, some place in the mind knowing how it would be when the edged metal grated through your eye sockets and the world went black—

*There's a place beyond the Gate, and we return, he thought, not for the first time. But not to this life. Death is a forgetting, whether it comes in terror like a tiger hunting in the night, or as the gentle Mother whose last gift is an end to pain. I'm not through being Rudi Mackenzie yet! Yet neither were these ready, who had their own purposes and needs. Dread Lord, Keeper-of-Laws, be gentle with those torn untimely from the world of men; and me also when my hour is come.*

He'd straightened when the three horsemen returned from their pursuit, and was wiping his blade on a swatch of rags torn from a body; Edain stood ready with another arrow on the string, discreetly pointed down and not drawn . . . yet. Garbh was glaring at his heel, tongue licking her reddened muzzle, ready for a leap to take a man out of the saddle. Epona abandoned a rear as Rudi grabbed her hackamore with his free hand—you didn't use a bit on her—and she prepared to tolerate the man as she did those around him when he asked it of her.

*Three. They lost a man, then. All of them wounded, but none very badly.*

She tossed her head and whickered a little disdainfully at the strangers' mounts; they were a good deal shorter than her seventeen hands of sleek black height, and none had her long-limbed grace. Their harness was crude, simple pad saddles and pre-Change bridles patched and repaired with bits and pieces of this and that. The Mackenzie chieftain waited with the sword still drawn, ready to strike

the three were inclined to add him to the larder.

"Owe you one, west-men," their leader said to Rudi, dismounting and extending a hand to them both in turn.

*Ah. They can tell we're from west across the Mississippi. From the gear, most likely. Though probably not quite how far west.*

"I'm Jake sunna Jake, n' these are my bros Tuk n' Samul." His smile revealed several missing teeth. "We runs with the Southside Freedom Fighters. I'm the big man a' Southside. Youze save our asses."

Rudi thrust his sword into the earth and took the man's hand, as callused as his own and very strong for his size. Probably *big man* meant something like *chief*. The native of the Wild Lands was several inches shorter than his own six-two, and failed to match Edain's five-nine by a finger or so; he was wiry-slender, with a sparse young black beard and hair haggled off below his ears and eyes so crowded colored that the pupil disappeared in the iris.

The dark olive face was scarred and weathered, but he judged the man was about his own twenty-three years, give or take. His short pants of crudely tanned and worse-sewn rabbit skins were held up by a broad belt with a buckle of salvaged metal; his weapons were a knife and a hatchet, besides his javelins, and all but the wooden shafts of the throwing spears looked to be of pre-Change make.

His eyes were shrewd as he took in Edain's bow, and he nodded at the peace gesture as the archer returned his arrow to the quiver. They went a little wider as he looked around and realized how many of the enemy had long gray fletched shafts in their bodies, and how far away some of them were; both were obvious as the younger Mackenzie went about the grisly but essential task of retrieving intact arrows and the heads of the broken ones. It was also obvious how easily they'd smashed through crude armor—leather studded with bits of metal, wooden shields surfaced with salvaged STOP signs and similar makeshifts for the most part, though one body wore a modern mail shirt stolen or bartered from the other shore of the Mississippi.

That hadn't helped its wearer either, though it made it harder to get the arrow out undamaged.

"Kin I zee?" he said. "Thass new."

Edain shook his head wordlessly as he grasped an arrow delicately with both sets of forefinger-and-thumb and pulled. He didn't like letting strangers touch his longbow—that one had been a special gift from his father, Aylward the Archer, the old man's personal war-bow that he'd set aside when he could no longer bend it. Rudi bent to retrieve his own and let the other man try it. Jake grunted incredulously; his arms were knotted with hard lean muscle, but they quivered and shook and he abandoned the effort before the string was halfway to his jaw. Drawing the great war-bow wasn't just a matter of raw strength, though it needed that too. You had to have the knack, and that came from long and constant training—Mackenzies started their children at age six or so.

Edain slipped his own weapon into the carrying loops beside his quiver, cleaned his hands on a tuft of grass and pointed to the bow riding behind one of the horsemen's saddles with a crook-fingered *like me have that* gesture. The rider hesitated for a moment, then handed it down.

"Fiberglass," the young Mackenzie archer said, at the feel of the stave.

That meant it was pre-Change, and lucky not to have aged and cracked into uselessness. The stuff the old world had confusingly called *plastic* mostly didn't rot, but it lost strength and suppleness unpredictably. Then he bent it with one contemptuous finger on the string before handing it back.

"Twenty, twenty-five pounds draw. Nobbut a toy for little children, and feeble children at that sure."

Most warriors were proud of their gear. Rudi could see the man begin to bridle before he looked around and spat in reluctant agreement.

Jake pushed a body over on its back with his foot.

"Knifers," he said, pointing a bare toe at two long-healed zigzag scars on the dead man's cheek like

parallel thunderbolts, evidently some tribal mark. "Shig-man's boys, all three bunches got together for dis. Bettuh we git outta here."

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One of the others snorted. "Runs allem till dark-dark aftah dis comin'."

*They'll still be running at sundown tomorrow*, Rudi translated mentally.

Jake shrugged. "Mays they come back. Tuk, Samul, git gowin."

The other two Southsiders had a family resemblance to their leader, save that one was natural dark brown of skin with tight-curved hair and broader features and the other pale blond. The ragged blankets all three had thrown over their saddle bows were probably their only other garments, and their bare feet were broad, callused enough that they likely went so always unless the weather was freezing. As the leader spoke, his companions were collecting any weapons worth having and making sure of the enemy wounded.

Rudi grimaced slightly to himself. That was sometimes needful, but never pleasant—much harder than killing in the white-hot savagery of battle. He noticed with relief that the wild-men were going about it with a rough mercy, taking care to make the final stroke as quick as possible. The sounds of agony died down into an echoing silence.

"Youze got free of our turf," Jake went on to the Mackenzie clansmen. "Come Southside first anytime y' want, sit down 'nd put a hand in the pot like a Freedom Fighter stud."

Rudi had to strain for a moment to understand the words through a thick accent, harsh and slurred and nasal at the same time, that turned *these* into *deeze* and *are* into *ur*.

"My thanks to you, Jake son of Jake," he said, slowly and clearly. "My name's Rudi Mackenzie, of the Clan Mackenzie; my sept totem is Raven. This is my blade-brother and sworn man Edain Aylward Mackenzie, called the Archer, of the Wolf sept. And you saved my life with that last spear-cast, as well, so I'm thinkin' we're even, so."

From his frown Jake found Rudi's lilt—stronger than most in Clan Mackenzie and the product of Juniper Mackenzie's own County Mayo accent—hard to follow as well. One of his tribesmen brought up a horse with a dead man across it.

"Thass our bro Murdy. The bastards killed him," Jake said. To the air: "You don't haunt us none spook-Murdy, 'cause we got 'em for y'!"

The others in the Southsider party added more to the same effect. Rudi nodded approval; it was a warrior's duty to avenge his comrades, and a kinsman's too.

"And speaking of duties, now that we have time . . ."

He and Edain each bent to one of the bodies of the slain foemen, touched blood to a finger and then to his forehead. Then they faced the west and he murmured with raised hands:

"To Your black-wing host we dedicate the harvest of this unplowed field, Morrigú, Lady of the Ravens. Dread Lord of Death and Resurrection, Guardians of the Western Gate, guide the souls of these our foemen to the Lands of Summer where no evil comes and all hurts are healed. Godde Mother-of-all, gentle and strong, through whose Cauldron we are all reborn, witness that we killed these Your children from need and duty, not wantonness, knowing that for us also the hour of the spear shall come, soon or late. For Earth must be fed."

"So mote it be," Edain finished.

They exchanged a glance and a slight nod. Rudi could tell the other Mackenzie was adding the same silent observation:

*And return these rotters in better condition for their next go-round on the Wheel, once they've spent some time with You.*

Jake gave Rudi a sharp look. "Hey, that's a good saying word t' keep spooks down . . . You two aren't part'a those bastards from Iowa, are you? You sure don't sound like 'em and they pray to the Jesus man."

It took Rudi a moment to realize what *doze bassids* meant; he made a mental effort to switch sound and fill in the missing parts of speech.

"No, that I am not," he said. "We're from the Far West, from the lands of sunset, where we follow the Star Goddess, Who is also Earth the Mother, and Her consort the Sun Lord."

*Well, some of us do*, he thought.

"I came to Iowa with my friends on a journey eastward—" *To the farthest East, to the lands of sunrise, to seek a sword seen in visions. That might perhaps be a wee bit complicated to discuss right now. Also the way the Prophet's men pursue us.*

"—and the Bossman's men set on us and took them captive."

*Which oversimplifies a bit, but is true in the essence.*

"He holds them hostage, until I return with a treasure—wagons left on a road north of here, just past a ruined town. The fall of . . . three years ago now."

Jake's brows went up; it was visible, in the light of moon and stars.

"Those? We know 'em. Nothing worth taking there. We checked. Not cloth or saddles or blades or nothing. Wagons too big for us, so we left 'em. Mebbe haunts there, mebbe bad spook luck."

Rudi shrugged and smiled. "They're what he wants, nonetheless. And I've been trying to get to them and not be killed by everyone I meet."

"Talk about it later," Jake said. He glanced up at the sky, obviously judging distance and time by the stars. "We gotta get Murdy away fore we bury him. Otherwise the Knifers, they'll track and dig him up and eat his heart 'n balls."

The dark young man, Tuk, spat on one of the bodies. "Bassids. Eaters. Monssers."

"Monssers?" Rudi asked, as they collected Edain's mount and the pack animal with their gear.

The living men mounted and headed westward along the river. Fireflies flickered across the water and a cool wet breath came from the river's surface. Rudi took a deep lungful, glad to be away from most of the stink of blood and opened bodies, though Murdy and the game on the packhorses—white-tail, an elk and a feral cow—weren't all that fragrant either. Something hooted in the woods; they all stiffened, and then relaxed when experienced ears told them it was a real bird. Tuk continued.

"Yeah, monssers, like the ones who chased our pamaws—"

*Ancestors*, Rudi realized, as they crossed the river where a fallen bridge broke the current and made a ford.

"—outta Chi-town in the Bad Time. They were just littles, but they was clean, our pamaws. Clean!"

In fact Jake and his friends were a fair bit ranker than the wet heat of summer here demanded, and their ill-cured clothes and harness smelled worse, not to mention the spatters of sticky drying blood that they ignored, despite the river being close at hand. Jake explained for the stranger as Rudi quickly bent and scooped up water and sand in passing to rub his hands free of the sticky mass that threatened to gum his fingers together. He could finish the job later, and take care of his sword—even the finest metal got nicks when you slammed it through bone.

"Didn't eat nobody, even when they had to kill 'em anyhow to keep their own asses off the cookfire. Not even once. The Knifers, they still eats man-meat sometimes. Even when they don't hafta. Think makes 'em spook-strong."

Pride of ancestry rang in his voice, and Rudi gave a little sigh of relief. That spared him the necessity of explaining what was *geasa* to him, taboo.

*And that story would help account for how crude their gear is*, Rudi thought. *If their parents were mostly children . . . teenagers at most . . . themselves. And how much their speech has changed. And this man is chief, none of the pamaws survived much longer than it took their own children to be three quarters grown. He's no older than me, I think.*

From what he'd heard, most of the folk of the old world had been utterly helpless when the Chan-

came and the machines stopped, country-folk and farmers only a little less than townsmen. In some places enough skills had been found or pieced together to build life new on old foundations; the Cl Mackenzie had been luckier than most, since many of its founders had been lovers of the ancient art. Close to the great cities it had been worst of all. There tens of millions were left without food or water; everything went down in a doomed scramble to keep alive an hour at a time, and plague ran through the surging masses like wildfire through dry grass.

From the Mississippi to the east coast, where the cities had been thickest, little remained but bands like these—and Rudi seemed to have been fortunate indeed in the ones he met.

*Luck of that sort is only to be expected, if you're fated to dree a hero's weird,* he thought with an inward grin, half at himself, half defiant mockery at the Powers. *It's one of the compensations for the fear and danger and general misery and the prospect of an early death. You're lucky until you aren't so to say.*

"They was all littles, the pamaws, 'cept old Jake, he was my pa, and Tuk 'n Samul's," Jake said. "He brought everyone out and hid 'em till the New Year. He was a good one, old Jake the sailor man. Dead a long time now, though; he's a good spook"—

*Spirit-guardian,* Rudi translated mentally.

—"for all of us Southside studs n' bitches."

*Men and women,* his mind added.

It was going to be a strain talking, until he learned a bit of this dialect. He'd heard many on his travels across the continent, but none quite so strange except those that weren't English at all.

They stayed in the river valley for the most part, working their way south and slightly west, despite the deep dark under the trees that blocked most of the moonlight. A little reflected from the rippling surface of the Illinois, enough to use if you were very careful, and if the horses were sure-footed. They rode on the verge of the broken pavement to spare their feet, with only the sound of the hooves to mark their passage. Rudi guessed that the Southsider camp was down by the riverbank, and was not surprised; it would be easier all round, with firewood close to hand, drinking water, cover from prying eyes, and shelter—the higher land around here was mostly open tallgrass prairie.

Epona tossed her head up and snorted. Rudi inhaled deeply; that was the smell of fires and cooking and the sweetish-rank smell of a camp not strictly kept, wastes and old food and raw hides curing with brains and piss. Evidently nobody had told these folk about using oak tanbark, despite it being a thing about them. Garbh growled at a chorus of yelping, barking mongrels, until Edain called her sharply to heel. Three more of the Southsider men stepped out from behind trees . . .

*No,* Rudi thought, looking at the faces and naked torsos behind the spearheads. *One of them is a Southsider woman . . .*

. . . and leveled their weapons, before crying greetings to Jake, and wailing at the sight of dead Murdy. More came swarming out to pelt them with questions and beat the curs off with sticks and their feet; about three score of all ages, and they walked in a crowd around the horses until they passed the tiger's skull on a pole and reached the fires and the rough corral.

*Say a hundred of them in all, half children. Three more-or-less grown women for every two men, or thereabouts,* Rudi thought, making a warrior's quick estimate.

Nobody was much older than his new friend Jake; he doubted more than a handful had been born at the time of the Change.

*High casualties?*

The mob gazed gape-jawed at Rudi and Edain in their strange gear, pointing and gabbling in a way the Mackenzies would think rude. Rudi sat his great black horse with long-limbed grace, the bright red gold hair falling to his shoulders and his sharp-cut high-cheeked face smiling. Edain was less easy, his strong square face blank; he wouldn't ask Rudi *are you sure?* with strangers about . . .

None of the Southsiders matched Rudi's height, and none had his companion's breadth of shoulder or barrel chest. *Not a prepossessing lot, but truly friendly, I think.*

Rudi winked at a naked toddler with a huge mop of frizzy hair; she ducked behind her mother herself a girl of no more than sixteen years who cradled a baby on her hip.

"Let these studs have room!" Jake called. "They saves our asses, truth! An' lay on eats! We got Murdy to bury, an' our new friends to show our right n' good ways!"

When the mob surged back towards the camp Jake went on quietly:

"And when we've had the eats, you can tell me more of that story of yours. We don't like the Iowa motherfuckers or their bossman at *all*. Shoved our pamaws back into this shit with their pitchforks. Keep us here still."

Rudi nodded gravely; Edain thawed a little, since he too had little use for Iowa's ruler and liked the whole place less than the older Mackenzie. The Iowa folk *had* closed the Mississippi bridges in the chaotic months after the Change and patrolled the western shore . . . or they'd have been buried beneath the tidal wave of refugees heading west from Chicago and the other lakeside cities, and none from Saint Louis.

*Though now they've more land than they can till*, he thought, remembering pasture where fields had once been, and at that more grass than the cattle could eat down. *They could change their policy, they would, and both would benefit by it.*

There was a hungry smile in Jake's words: "Anyone's got a hate against that Bossman bastard, he's got a word to say here."

"Sure, and I'd not weep if he were to be done an injury," Rudi said. "He's not the worst ruler I've ever met, but he's far from the best—and not the smartest, either, that he is not."

*The smartest of rulers? A toss-up between my mother and Matti's, that would be; the one wise and good, the other wise and wicked.*

He realized with a start that he missed Mathilda's mother; missed her counsel, and her peculiar way of looking at the world. They'd always gotten on well enough, even when he'd been her husband's captive during the War of the Eye, but then again you never really knew where you stood with the Spider of the Silver Tower. He *did* know she loved Mathilda . . .

*I've never really understood her, otherwise. She's a bad person, really, but she's raised Matti to be a good one, and she was always kind to me, even when she pushed me hard to learn and grow. She's done great evil, but great good also, if more from policy than inclination; and I think that the good will long outlive her, while the evil will mostly vanish . . . start to vanish, at least . . . when Matti takes the throne of Portland and rules the Association. And the more I travel, the more I realize I've learned from her, those months every year I lived in the Regent's Household—things I never could have learned at home. Mother has true wisdom, but it's not all the wisdom there is. What she stands for is good, but some things can't be seen from where she stands.*

And that was something he could only realize at a distance from them both; as if the knowledge unfolded with the weight of their personalities removed for a while, letting it open like a flower from the bud.

*And at home I would never have realized what I knew*, he mused, looking westward to where stars shone over the treetops.

*Nor learned what I have from others on this journey. Am I journeying to the east, then, or do I travel towards myself? When I meet the man I am becoming . . .*

"Who will Rudi Mackenzie be in himself?" he mused. "Will those I know, know me still?"

*One thing I do know: I'll rescue Matti for her own sweet sake . . . but even if she wasn't dear to me I'd be downright terrified of failing Lady Sandra Arming!*

# BARONY OF ATH, PORTLAND PROTECTIVE ASSOCIATION TULATIN VALLEY, OREGON AUGUST 15, CHANGE YEAR 24/2022 AD

The Lord High Chancellor and the Grand Constable of the PPA rode side by side through the harvested field, with their hawks on their wrists and the attendants at a discreet distance behind. A covey of pheasants exploded from the ground ahead of their horses in a cracking flutter of wings.

Both the Associates were in what Portlander fashion decreed for gentlemen engaged in rural pleasures on a summer's day; turned-down thigh boots with the golden spurs of knighthood on the heels, doeskin breeches, baggy-sleeved linen shirts beneath long T-tunics cinched by broad sword belts of studded and tooled leather, and wraparound sunglasses in gilded frames.

Embroidered heraldic shields on their chests showed their arms. Those of Chancellor Conrad Renfrew—also Count of Odell—were sable, a snow-topped mountain argent on vert; it echoed the towering perfect cone of Mt. Hood, just visible as a tiny silver spike on the eastern horizon. Barone Tiphaine d'Ath bore sable, a delta or over a Vargent; she wore a discreet livery badge at the brow of her hat as well, her own arms quartered with Sandra Arminger's in token of vassalage.

"Your turn," the Count of Odell said, nodding towards the pheasants skimming over the ground.

"Thanks, Conrad," Tiphaine said.

This was one of the Five Great Fields of her manor of Montinore, and the three hundred acres of brown-blond wheat stubble with clover pushing up below provided plenty of cover. The ring of hawthorn hedge and wide-spaced poplars around it were full of good places for nesting, and even conscientious gleaners didn't get all the fallen grain that attracted quarry.

"Three gets you five that cock pheasant makes it to the hedge," the older noble said.

The big black-gray peregrine on her wrist crouched and bated with a bristle of feathers as she slipped free the hood, and a faint sweet ring from the silver bells on its bewit-straps as the talons closed and relaxed in anticipation. It knew what the sudden coming of the light meant. Then its mandible slit-pupil yellow eyes flared dark as they fixed themselves on the prey; she could feel the strength of its grip on her wrist through the thick leather of the glove.

"Done," Tiphaine replied. "Go for it, Riot Grrrl."

She tossed the arm up in a quick throwing arc and the bird flung itself skyward, soaring upward in a widening gyre with a harsh *skri-skri-skri*. The wind of long graceful wings was cool on her cheek and neck for an instant, in the mild dry warmth of a Willamette summer's day.

The covey's alarm suddenly turned panic-stricken as the incarnate shadow of deep ancestral fear fell across them; they scattered, spattering away like water popping on a hot griddle. Frenzied, the male pheasant tried to outrace the circling doom rather than going for cover, his long tail feathers streaming

as he strove for height.

"Stop taking the air, you idiot," the Count of Odell said sourly. "She's twice as fast as you are!"

Tiphaine watched the dance of life and death in the cloudless blue above with eyes the color of moonlit glaciers, and smiled with a very slight curve of the lips. It made everything seem more intense for a moment, from the feel of the great muscles moving between her thighs to the smells of equine sweat and oiled leather, sweet crushed clover and dry dusty earth.

"That's a lovely falcon you've got there," Conrad said, following the flight of the peregrine. "And she's going to cost *me* some money, dammit. Alaskan?"

She nodded. "Aleutian."

"Must have cost *you*," he said.

Trade was sparse from those remote islands, and had to run the gauntlet of Haida pirates in the Queen Charlottes and the Inland Passage. Only the most expensive luxury goods could bear the costs.

"Worth it," she replied. "Northern birds always fly better, especially in yarak."

The Association nobles reined in and watched the falcon climb; the bird sitting hooded on Conrad Renfrew's wrist was a big dark brown mews-bred Harris Hawk with chestnut shoulders and white banding on the base and tip of its tail. It had already taken two rabbits and a duck today. Despite which

...

*It's hardly falconry at all with a Harris,* Tiphaine thought.

She privately considered that species to be like Irish setters with feathers and talons. Unlike prettier well all other birds of prey they were social hunters, coursing in flocks in the wild, and they were affectionate to their handlers in ways other breeds just weren't. That and the ease with which they could be bred in captivity made them favorites.

*They do everything but lick your hand and lift a leg to pee.*

"You've got a good eye for a falcon," he admitted.

"I always did identify with predators. Back before the Change"—

Conrad had been over thirty then; she'd been fourteen. They'd both survived the first Change Year when the vast majority of the human race had not, but the experience divided as much as it linked them. His generation were of the old world; those a few years younger than she were Changelings. She hung between—

"my bedroom was plastered with pictures of hawks and wolves and tigers and leopards."

The Count of Odell's hideously scarred face quirked in a smile. "Isn't it usually horses with girls that age?"

"Usually. I preferred things with fangs or claws or both."

"Why am I not surprised, *Lady Death*?" he said, using the common pun on her title.

"Well, I had a Melissa Etheridge poster on the wall too."

"Who . . . oh, she was a musician, right? I think I've heard you do some of her stuff now and then."

"Right. Serious crush on her at the time."

That had been an eventful spring. She'd turned fourteen in January, met Katrina Georges in February when the other girl transferred to Binnsmeade Middle School, won a medal at the Oakridge gymnastics meet at the beginning of March, and then on the seventeenth the world had ended, at 6:30 p.m. Pacific Time.

*Birthday, first love, victory, then the laws of nature Change while you're on a camping trip. Killed my first man five days later and couldn't believe how easy it was. But I do miss CDs and my Walkman sometimes. Calling for the minstrel just isn't the same.*

The thought was odd; it had been a long time since she remembered the Change much, or thought of herself as Collette Rutherton rather than the name Sandra had chosen for her when she became an Associate of the PPA. Conrad's generation always had one mental foot planted in the old world.

however hard they tried to pull it out or deny it; hers remembered it, but as though seen faded through multiple panes of glass . . . except on the rare occasions when it came flooding back to make the no seem like a mad dream for an instant.

To those a few years younger, the Changelings, it was a fable.

*And I envy them that. Envy them and fear it a little. Even Delia . . . I love her but I don't understand her sometimes. The kids are even worse. They don't just take this world we've made naturally. They think but they don't think about thinking the way I do sometimes and Conrad and Sandra and the other oldsters do all the time. The Changelings . . . it's like they're in a dream. So am I, but I know it. They never wake up or know they're dreaming.*

"Ah," Tiphaine said, pulling off her tinted glasses and shading her eyes with the hand that held them.

A second later Conrad pushed his mirrorshades up onto the bald dome of his head and muttered something under his breath—probably *damn* as the falcon selected the cock pheasant's gaudy gold and-green plumage for its target.

The peregrine stooped out of the sun, folding its wings and turning itself into a blurred streak of purpose. There was a faint *thud* from the air above, a puff of feathers against the bright afternoon sky.

"She binds!" Tiphaine said, and didn't add: *I win.*

The two birds spun groundward locked together by the attacker's talons. They struck with a thump on the wheat stubble not far away; the peregrine shrieked its triumph and its rage, mantling and darting its ripping beak downward with cruel precision. Everyone cantered over and pulled up; the falconer dismounted and whirled his feathered lure on the end of its cord with a rattling humm. The bird cocked an eye at it and jumped, then consented to be hooded again and fed from the hand. Varle picked up the pheasant and added it to the basket, giving the neck a quick twist to make sure.

"That's enough for verisimilitude," Conrad said with a sigh. "Duty calls, and so does lunch."

Tiphaine nodded and turned her horse. They heeled their mounts into a faster pace, towards the little unwallied pavilion where the others waited. Conrad looked around at the stubble field.

"Nice work," he said. "You can hardly see where the individual strips are."

Montinore manor operated on the usual PPA system; the peasant families each held scattered strips in all of the Five Fields, and the crops—winter wheat, spring oats and roots like turnips or potatoes, grass and clover for fodder—were rotated through the fields in turn. Back in the early days the semi-communal arrangement had let a few real farmers supervise hordes of refugee suburbanites who had never before done anything more rural than curse the dandelions in their lawns. Nowadays it made it easy for the manor lord to exact his share of the crop and labor service on the demesne.

Tiphaine shrugged. "I've got good reeves on my estates and a first-rate seneschal," she said. "And Delia keeps *them* from dipping into the till while I'm away, which is too often. I *like* living here, and to hell with Portland and Castle Todenangst. I'm sick of spending my days in armor; being Sandra's assassin and duelist was fun, but Grand Constable is just work. Damn the Prophet, damn the United States of Boise, and damn this war too."

"Now you know why I was so glad to unload the job on *you*." Conrad shrugged in turn. "Be glad you've got a nice defensive war you can really get your teeth into. We'd likely be fighting about now even if Boise and Corwin hadn't gotten big eyes. Sandra hasn't had us spend the last decade and change building castles and saving up money and training troops for nothing."

Tiphaine sighed. "You're right, of course. She's not any less ambitious than Norman was, just a head of a lot more patient and sneaky. Oh, well, she's the sovereign."

"Until Mathilda comes of age," Conrad said, and grinned like the ornament on a cathedral waterspout. "*That's* going to be interesting."

"Then it'll be the Changelings' turn. I suspect by then a lot of things will be different."

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